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[Features](#)

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• [Engagements](#)

• [Weddings](#)

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[Heartland](#)

[Projects](#)

[Staff](#)

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- » [Daily poll](#)
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Decatur residents forge community as they unite to fight destructive floodwaters.

By Kirkland Crawford
of The News-Sentinel

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There are hundreds of memories Decatur residents will carry from the Flood of '03. The water. The destruction. The smell. The cleanup. Through all the bad, there is some good to be gleaned. People rushed to the aid of their neighbors, packing and hauling sandbags in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart to hold off the rising floodwaters.



News-Sentinel photo by [Ellie Bogue](#)

Saving special belongings

Cody Pancake pulls a load through the water down Parkview Drive in Decatur on Tuesday, July 8. Like scores of other Decatur residents, he was helping a family rescue some of their belongings from a flooded home.

Hailing from all ages and backgrounds, they huddled around the 10-by-20-foot wall of sand. With sweat on their brows, mud on their shoes and shovels in their hands, they were there to do anything that needed to be done.

The cause of all the trouble -- the St. Marys River -- crested in Decatur at 26.92 feet early Wednesday, July 9 -- a record level.

Sandbagging had begun Monday, July 7, once it was clear the river would continue to rise. Tuesday, July 8, volunteers packed and piled 40-50-pound sandbags from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m., producing more than enough of them to stem the rising waters.

By Sunday, July 13, the water had dropped to 20.31 feet, more than 6 feet below its crest. Tuesday, the water was at 14.8 feet, finally below the 17-foot flood point.

"The community has been a tremendous help, which all of the county and city officers greatly appreciate," said Adams County Sheriff Chuck Padgett. "It's been a great cooperative effort."

Unfortunately, there was no way to stop the destruction.

Parkview Drive makes a loop on the city's southeast corner. The floods hit

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there hardest. Many folks were cleaning out their homes last weekend, trying to salvage anything they could.

With three children and another on the way, Scott Smedley had just added on to his home at 822 Parkview Drive. He thinks the flood ruined any chance of him and his wife raising a family there.

"My foundation fell in," he said, pointing to the hole in the floor of his house. Smedley said about a foot and a half of water came into his home, which is built on a cement slab.

"We lost everything," he said. "I don't know what's going to happen from here. All I know is that I'm not going to rebuild here. I'm not going to put my family through this, no matter what."

After the governor's office declared a state of emergency, the Indiana National Guard rushed in Tuesday, July 8, 53 strong, with 11 trucks, 2 tons and 5 tons, to transport sandbags -- and people -- where necessary.

Stationed at Northwest Adams Elementary School, across the street from the Wal-Mart, the Guard was there to supply muscle and motivation.

"The civilians are all excited to be around the Army guys," said Staff Sgt. Jose Garcia. "Everyone likes riding around in the back of the trucks and going through the water in them."

Reinforcements from Bluffton and the surrounding area eventually brought the total to 137 Guardsmen. Capt. James Claghorn said about 1,300 total volunteers came through the Wal-Mart sandbagging operation the week of July 7-13.

As the river spilled onto the streets of Decatur and into its homes, many people were left without a place to sleep. The American Red Cross not only provided shelter for them, but provided financial assistance for those who lost their homes and anything and everything inside them.

The Adams County chapter of the Red Cross opened a shelter in Berne, about 12 miles south of Decatur, that housed seven families from Berne and five from Decatur.

Executive Director Vickie Ellis is the only paid employee of the Adams County Red Cross, and she's only part-time. She credited volunteers, including makeshift counselors, caregivers and donors, who were vital to the organization's relief effort.

"We've had a lot of caseworkers," Ellis said. "Flood victims come in and talk with us, and we try to give them disbursing orders for food, clothes, bedding and even prescriptions."

Ellis said that as of Tuesday, the Red Cross had helped more than 60 families write more than \$26,000 in disbursing forms.

The Red Cross and the Mennonite Disaster Service, which specializes in rebuilding after a disaster, will begin assessing the damage in Decatur on Monday.



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